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SUBJECT: GAZA SITUATION REPORT, DECEMBER 30, 18:00

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Classified By: A/DCM Marc Sievers, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

¶1. (S) Summary: The IDF continued to reinforce and increase ground forces around the Gaza periphery, including robust logistical support and elements from brigades not typically deployed in the Gaza sector. No ground operations have been initiated; the senior GOI leadership is discussing a range of options. Air strikes during the early morning hours of December 30 destroyed a number of Hamas strategic and tactical targets, including a government complex in Gaza City. Rockets and mortars from Gaza continued to strike Israel, reaching as far north as Yavne and as far east as Rahat; one Israeli woman in Ashdod and an IDF soldier near Nahal Oz were killed in rocket strikes during the evening of December 29. According to the IDF, 93 truckloads of humanitarian supplies entered Gaza via the Kerem Shalom crossing during the day on December 30. During a strategic assessment meeting on December 29, PM Olmert challenged GOI officials to avoid talk of a ceasefire, and directed IDF forces to continue their operations with an undefined duration. An Israeli Navy vessel rammed a boat from the Free Gaza movement carrying humanitarian assistance to Gaza from Cyprus, forcing it to turn back. The Free Gaza boat sustained damage but was able to travel north to the Lebanese port of Tyre. The Embassy disseminated a warden message to avoid the 30km area from Gaza due to on-going IDF operations and rocket attacks. End summary.

Military Operations

¶2. (SBU) Israeli air and naval forces attacked dozens of Hamas targets throughout the Gaza Strip overnight and during the morning hours of December 30. According to the IDF Spokesperson, targets included three buildings in the Hamas government complex -- including the Hamas ministries of interior and foreign affairs and PM's offices -- in the Tel Al-Hawa neighborhood, Hamas training camps and outposts, stations held by Hamas naval forces, a vehicle transporting a stockpile of Grad missiles, rocket launchers, a weaponry manufacturing facility, and sites used as headquarters by terror cells. Israeli media reported that two top Hamas weapons engineers were killed in the December 29 strike on research labs at the Islamic University.

¶3. (S/NF) The IDF continues its deployment of ground forces around the Gaza periphery, although no ground operations had been initiated as of 1800 local. Poor weather conditions may have been a contributing factor, although late-breaking press reports also indicate that "senior defense officials" may recommend a 48-hour truce to evaluate Hamas' reaction prior to launching any ground offensive. Israel Defense Intelligence (IDI) sources told DAO officers that ground operations could begin at any time; a deciding factor would be weather conditions facilitating the ability to provide close air support and medical evacuation. During the evening

of December 29, rain and lowered ceilings dominated weather conditions; overcast skies were prevalent over Gaza during much of the day on December 30. The tempo of air operations decreased greatly during the afternoon of December 30.

¶4. (S) The IDF continues to reinforce and increase its logistical footprint around Gaza. DAO officers observed more robust logistical support for units in assembly areas at Erez Crossing and at the artillery position located south of Kibbutz Nir'am. Unit flags, tents, and port-a-johns have been erected at these locations. Overnight, reinforcements from units previously unobserved in the Gaza sector arrived, including elements of the Givati Brigade, the Golani Brigade's 12th Battalion, and the Kfir Brigade's Heruv Battalion. DAO reports that the preponderance of IDF units are located around the northern half of Gaza; the deployment of High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) with mounted mock turrets may represent decoy attempts to portray a larger presence in the south.

¶5. (S) DATT reports that during a briefing to military attaches and UN military representatives on December 29, IDF Strategic Division Commander Brigadier General Yossi Heyman noted the 122mm rocket attacks on the port of Ashdod demonstrated that Hamas is capable of launching rockets of up to 35km -- putting more than 500,000 Israelis in the range of rockets emanating from Gaza. BG Heyman said the IDF was "prepared for a long operation," and stressed that the IDF was doing its best to minimize civilian casualties. Reserve Brigadier General Baruch Spiegel informally mentioned to embassy officers December 30 that the IDF is ready to carry out a detailed plan for ground operations with multiple

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stages and a range of levels of intensity, but is waiting for orders from the political level -- presumably the inner war cabinet of PM Olmert, Defense Minister Barak, Foreign Minister Livni, and Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Ashkenazi. Spiegel said he thought the decision whether to launch a ground operation would be made in the next 48 hours.

He commented that the IDF is not in a hurry and can continue to build up ground forces without pressure to act. Spiegel and his colleague at the Economic Cooperation Foundation Boaz Karni told us that the GOI's goal of a "sustainable ceasefire" was being complicated by the fact that senior Hamas officials in Gaza have all gone underground and are not able to communicate with potential mediators.

¶6. (SBU) As of 1715 local December 30, approximately 20 rockets have been fired throughout the day from Gaza, according to press reports. Most of these rockets landed in or near Sderot, injuring two Israelis and damaging several properties. One rocket struck as far east as the vicinity of Rahat; another Qassam rocket scored a direct hit on a kibbutz dining hall in the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council. According to the Israeli MFA, approximately 90 rockets were fired from Gaza at Israel on December 29. Three Israelis were killed by rocket and mortar fire on December 29, including a construction worker in Ashkelon (Grad-type rocket), a soldier in the Nahal Oz area (Qassam/mortar attack), and a woman in Ashdod (Grad-type rocket). Four Israelis have been killed since the start of operation "Cast Lead" on December 27. During the evening of December 29, several rockets hit in or near Okafim in the east and Yavne in the north, demonstrating increasing range. Israeli schools in a 30km radius from Gaza remained closed on December 30.

Political Developments

¶7. (SBU) According to media reports, during a December 29 evening situation assessment meeting with FM Livni, Defense Minister Barak, Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Ashkenazi, Shin Bet Director Diskin, and Mossad Director Dagan, PM Olmert reportedly instructed meeting attendees not to talk

about a cease-fire with Hamas. He ordered the IDF to continue its actions with an undefined end to the operation. Olmert stressed that Israel will act against Hamas "with an iron fist," but would treat the population in Gaza "with silk gloves" by ensuring the provision of humanitarian aid, food, and other needs.

¶18. (SBU) Israeli Minister of National Infrastructure Binyamin Ben-Eliezer (Labor Party) said to the press that Israel would not cease the operation in Gaza until Hamas stopped firing rockets at Israel. He said the operation will continue until a "new reality" is created in which communities on the Gaza periphery can "lead their lives quietly." Minister for Industry, Trade and Labor Eli Yishai (Shas Party) commented that the Israeli elections scheduled for February 10 should not be postponed due to the situation in Gaza.

¶19. (C) The MFA is closely following Egyptian-Turkish discussions of possible ceasefire terms, which they believe are backed by the USG. Israeli press reports, meanwhile, speculate on a joint French-British proposal to force a cease-fire on Israel and Hamas. According to the press, the proposal will be presented at an emergency session of the EU's foreign ministers' meeting on December 30. The Israeli press quotes Foreign Ministry sources as saying the "British are promoting a very bad proposal for Israel." The same sources indicate the "international hourglass" would allow Israel to continue its operation in Gaza at most until January 5. Israeli press reports indicate that "senior defense officials" may recommend a short-term cessation of hostilities to evaluate Hamas' reaction, although the cabinet's views on any such suggestion were unclear as of 1800 local.

Humanitarian Assistance

¶10. (SBU) The MFA and the IDF's Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) reiterated the GOI policy that any international aid will be permitted into Gaza. According to COGAT information relayed via the MFA, the Kerem Shalom crossing was open on December 30, but closed at 1500 local. One hundred and ten trucks carrying medical equipment and food were expected, but only 93 actually crossed into Gaza due to time constraints and lack of preparedness on the part of some trucks, according to COGAT.

¶11. (SBU) According to USAID, 14 UN World Food Program (WFP)

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trucks with 400 metric tons of wheat flour and 21 metric tons of biscuits entered Gaza on December 30 through the Kerem Shalom crossing. USAID reports that all USAID-funded food commodities for non-refugee beneficiaries are already in Gaza; delivery will begin as soon as the security situation permits.

¶12. (SBU) The Nahal Oz crossing was closed after a mortar attack on the crossing on December 29; COGAT via the MFA reported that the security situation on December 30 prevented the opening of the terminal. The MFA also noted the GOI was aware that the Gaza power station needs diesel fuel, and is working on an alternative point of entry as the Nahal Oz crossing was closed. COGAT also reported that the Karni crossing remained closed December 30 due to on-going military operations in the area; it is not clear whether the security situation will allow for the crossing to be opened on December 31. According to the MFA, COGAT suggested to UNRWA that wheat originally destined to enter through Karni be repacked in sacks to allow for a transfer at the Kerem Shalom crossing. (Comment: We doubt this offers a realistic solution, given the very large volume of bulk wheat needed by UNRWA and the additional pressure it would place on the Keren Shalom crossing.)

¶13. (SBU) The MFA continued to argue on December 30 that

inefficiencies on the part of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) Ministry of Health (MOH) -- and not the GOI -- are responsible for the delay of medical supplies into Gaza. According to the MFA, several NGOs have complained about the PA MOH's inefficiency.

¶14. (SBU) The MFA reports that the GOI has approved the following new humanitarian assistance shipments:

- One aircraft from Norway with WHO medical supplies (expected in next few days)
- One aircraft from Geneva with Red Cross medical supplies (expected in next few days)
- Two aircraft from Russia with humanitarian goods (expected to arrive on or around January 2)

¶15. (SBU) USAID sources report that 45 to 50 truckloads of medical supplies, basic food items, and blankets donated by Qatar and Libya are waiting on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing and are expected to enter Gaza on December 30. Four electrical generators for the Gaza Ministry of Health facilities are also at the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing waiting to enter Gaza.

¶15. (SBU) According to press reports, Olmert, Livni and Barak agreed December 29 to allow Qatar to airlift humanitarian aid to Gaza in coming days. Several aircraft from Qatar will land in Israel; food and medicine will subsequently be trucked to Gaza.

¶16. (SBU) The MFA expects the GOI to approve the full list of foreign citizens wishing to be evacuated from Gaza, including any American citizens. The GOI is now working with Jordan to permit the expeditious entry of these potential evacuees into Jordan via the Allenby Bridge with departure through Amman airport. The MFA expects the GOI to allow the evacuation within the "coming days."

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